

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 16, 2013
Luke 7:11-17ⁱ

Part I

For some time the bulletin has had a paragraph that explains the season of the church year in which we find ourselves. Since the current one has been there for weeks, you may have found yourself passing over it.

If that is the case, let me refresh you. It says that “from June 21st the fullness of the sun’s light wanes. Its path is lower and lower across the sky. The time when light is superior to darkness grows shorter and shorter.ⁱⁱ” How true that is! In just one more week darkness will be superior to light. It goes on to say, that it reminds us that “all creatures including man do not endure forever.ⁱⁱⁱ”

Today’s text strikes that note squarely. We see that in the crowd leaving the city of Nain. At the front of that crowd was a dead man. Pall bearers carried him on an open coffin, called, a bier. They were carrying him to his final resting place. A large crowd followed. Family and friends turned out for the burial. Their hearts went out to the mother; they felt for her. She had to bury her son. It should be the other way around. Not only that, her loss was compounded by the fact that she was already a widow.

In that funeral procession, then, we see the faces of the mother; of her relatives. There are the faces of her son’s boyhood friends; of her next door neighbors. We see in that funeral procession *more* faces; your and my faces. There are the faces of family and friends as we follow our dead; as we lay our loved ones in their final resting places.

At those times we feel a sense of helplessness. It reminds me of a fictional story about a family whose mother had died unexpectedly. It left the family reeling. The father, Danny, was a veterinarian. He had his clinic on the home property. One day, after his wife’s death, he went to his clinic. At the clinic he was lost. He tried to focus, but was unable to focus. He was there in body, but his mind was checked out.

While he was in the clinic, a family member happened to come looking for him. She noticed that the father was checked out. She felt she had to do something. So she asked, “Can I help you, Danny?” He replied with a question, “Can you bring her back from the dead?” The family member was at a loss. “No,” she said. The father then replied, “Then you can’t help me.” It was a feeling of utter helplessness; a feeling common to us all in the face of death.

Not only is there a sense of helplessness at death, death is indiscriminate. It is not respecter of persons. That was true of the dead son. The mother buried her son. If death were a respecter of persons, the son would have buried his mother. It speaks to the truth that it does not matter if you are young or old; rich or poor; famous or common; it does not care if it gives a warning or not; it could care less if it is fair nor not. Death has no feelings.

True, in many cases death gives a warning. It comes after a prolonged illness. Bedridden, it robs the sick of life. We have felt that a number of times already this year as a congregation. In other cases there is no warning. We have felt that kind of sudden loss within our congregation this September. It has struck without warning in our families, not once, but more than once.

Either way, with or without warning, death brings sorrow. It did for the mother of the dead son. She was weeping. Her heart ached at the loss of her son. Jesus himself knew that heartache. When he went to his friend, Lazarus', gravesite, it tugged on his heart. His eyes began to well up; tears began to roll down his face. The apostle records that, "Jesus wept."^{iv}

That's to say that Jesus felt the human emotion that we feel when we lose a loved one. We, too, are moved to tears at the news of a relative's death; we, too, weep at the gravesite. Whether that is recent or in the past, we still feel that loss; that ache; and the tears well up.

At the bottom of those tears is the fact that death separates us from our loved ones. God never intended it to be that way. No. He didn't. He didn't, but our first parent, Adam, sinned. When he sinned, death entered the world. Death has now become a part of our world. God put it this way, "by one man sin entered the world and death through sin; and thus death spread to all men because all (have) sinned."^v

And who was at the bottom of it? The devil was. Sin and death are the devil's evil handiwork.

Part II

...but Jesus wouldn't let the devil get the upper hand. That takes us back to Nain. The bier, carried by pallbearers, followed by a crowd, was going out of Nain. Jesus, followed by another crowd, was going in. At the head of one procession was Death; at the head of the other was Life. The two crowds met head to head.

When Jesus saw the mother's grief, it *tugged* at his heart. The first thing he did was to speak to the grieving mother; "Do not weep." Jesus' words were not a reprimand, as if her weeping were bad. No. It was not meant as a reprimand, but as comfort. It was as if to say, "I will dry your tears." It was a *hint* as to what he was about to do.

Then Jesus did something *provocative*. He touched the bier. The pallbearers stopped. No one questioned him. After the touch, he spoke to the dead as if he were asleep. "Young man, I say to you arise." The response was immediate. "He sat up and began to speak." So, Jesus presented him to his mother. The two separated by death were once again reunited.

Now, this miracle is familiar to us. We have heard it again and again. We know it. The result is that we can hear it in a "ho-hum" way; in somewhat of a disinterested way. It reflects that skeptic in us.

But think at what is at stake here. This miracle points to *Jesus' empty tomb*. The empty tomb says that Jesus *rent* the grave's seal; that he *triumphed* over sin, death and the devil.

Now either Jesus did that or he didn't. If Jesus didn't rise, then our faith is in vain,^{vi} the apostle says. The facts, however, are clear. There records are there. They were written by eyewitnesses, the apostles. They wrote by inspiration what they saw. They saw the risen Lord with their own eyes. Hundreds and hundreds of meticulous copies have been made of those original accounts. We have them preserved for us in the Bible.

Lawyers have taken those eyewitness accounts. They have subjected them to *cross examination*. They have done so to determine if there are any loopholes, cracks, conflicting testimony. There aren't. The eyewitness' accounts are *air tight*. Jesus' resurrection is an historical *fact*.^{vii} Jesus rose from the dead. He turned death on its head. It is the singular most important event in world history.

Let's revisit that provocative touch of the bier to see how so. What Jesus did was taboo. It was *because* it was the custom of the day to not touch the dead. If they did, the touch made them unclean. Unclean, they were cut off from the community. They were until they did a cleansing ritual. It was all a way of teaching how sin and death cut us off from God. It does because the uncleanness of sin that brings death is a stench. It is the stench of death in God's nose.

Jesus' touch, then, *is* provocative. He touches the bier *as if to say* that he is absorbing sin and death in his body. That's just what he did on the cross. He took the stench of death, our sin, in his body. Carrying that stench he was cut off from God; for you. Then he rose to say that death had no hold on him. It didn't because he took away the stench of death, sin, in his death. It is buried in his grave; gone; forever!

It all goes to say that in Jesus, Life meets Death; and Life wins! That's precisely why we meet here Sunday after Sunday. After all, all of us are in a funeral procession. At the head of the procession is death; we are faces in the crowd. We are following Death to our graves. Here in this place, though, we meet *another* procession. At the head of this procession is Jesus. We have become faces in the crowd following him. We are following Life to our eternal life.

Here it is, then, that Life comes into our death broken world. Here you were joined to Jesus' death at the baptismal font. By those waters the stench of death, your sin, was buried in Jesus' death. By those same waters, you were joined to his resurrection. Joined to him, you have vibrant new life.

Here he continues to speak to you words of life. "I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in me though he may die, he shall live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."^{viii} That means you are no longer helpless in the face of death. No you are not. Jesus triumphed over death for you. No longer do you hopelessly shed tears. Jesus dries your tears with his words. He does as if he had a napkin in hand.

It is all a prequel to the great last day when he will call all the dead from their graves. Then he will give those who followed him their bodies back – like new – to live with him forever. That includes you and me and our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

Part III

Back at Nain the crowd reacted to this miracle of life. They glorified God, "A great prophet has risen up among us"; and "God has visited his people."

There is more than meets the eye here. The crowd was not saying that Jesus was just some prophet; a great miracle worker; a spiritual guru. He is one of many from which you can choose. Not at all! No. They saw that in Jesus God *kept* his word. He kept his word to send the Prophet; the Messiah; that God had come in the flesh; that God had come to save his people. They glorified God by saying what he had done for them.

It's the same thing the church's liturgy and song does. It glorifies God. It does by singing back to God what he has done for us. It sings that no other event in the history of the world is so *life changing* as Jesus' empty tomb; that no other event in your life is so *life changing* as hearing God's word. God entered fallen creation. He did and Life met Death; and Life *won*. God enters your life broken by death. He gives you not death, but life *for* death. He does because **Jesus is the Lord of Life!** Amen!

(Today we will sing back to God what he has done for us in the Te Deum. We will sing Luther's version of it. The choir will lead us; and will be divided into two choirs. One choir will be on the pulpit side, the other on the organ side. The congregation may join in as it feels comfortable according to its respective sides.

After the Te Deum, we will receive the offering.)

ⁱ References to the text (NKJV) will not be cited in the sermon

ⁱⁱ *Planning the Service*, Ralph Gherke, p. 82

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 82

^{iv} John 11.35

^v Romans 5.12

^{vi} I Corinthians 15.17

^{vii} For a fuller treatment on this theme see *Religion on Trial* and *The Defense Never Rests* by Craig Parton

^{viii} John 11.25,26